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UK harvest 2016¹

Vintage 2016 in English and Welsh vineyards has turned out to be one of two halves: one half was good – excellent sugar levels and very ripe grapes – whilst the other half was not so good – yields in many vineyards were way below those required to pay the bills. It has also turned out to be one of two halves in respect of geography: the east of England – East Anglia, Kent and East Sussex – had much drier conditions and higher sunshine levels and fared much better than counties to the west of East Sussex.

The weather

The year started off with fairly good weather and bud-burst occurred at the normal time. Some vineyards, especially those in West Sussex, Surrey and Hampshire, suffered from a few late spring frosts which set their vines back (especially Chardonnay) and led to low yields in those vineyards affected. Weather during the planting season was fair with little rain, but from around mid-May to the end of June, conditions were wet and temperatures below average which led to Downy Mildew starting in some vineyards. Some varieties – Bacchus, Pinot noir and Pinot noir Précoce – suffered from EBSN (Early Bunch Stem Necrosis) and in part accounted for the low average yields. Because of the cool run-up to flowering, it took place a little later than average, and was split into two halves. Early varieties and early sites got a poor first week for flowering, but a better second week; later varieties and later sites got two good weeks and consequently fared better. Poor flowering conditions in many vineyards resulted in considerable run-off and *coulure* and *millerandage* were very evident.

After flowering the weather deteriorated and for the second half of July and the first half of August, sunshine levels were lower than average and bunches were very slow to grow and expand. *Véraison* in many vineyards did not really get going until the end of August and extended well into September and it was looking like it was going to be another late harvest, similar to 2013 and 2015. However, the weather brightened up around mid-August with Gravesend in Kent recording 33.9°C (93°F) on 24 August. The warm and dry weather continued into September and October and saved the day in terms of sugars, but of course could do nothing about the small yields in many vineyards. Many growers reported low bunch weights and small berries, this probably being due to the fact that the stalks of the bunch did not have the weather they needed to grow, and then when the good weather did

¹ The data upon which this report is based has been provided by 31 producers across the whole of England who in total grow 547-ha of vines. Whilst this is around 25 per cent of all UK vineyards, some of them are quite youthful and carrying their first or second harvests and this is reflected in some of the results. In addition, some of the individual grape variety data is based upon quite a small sample and this must be taken into account.

arrive, there was a lack of moisture to swell the grapes. Harvesting took place in almost completely dry conditions – a rarity in the UK – and winemakers have been reporting excellent wines from all varieties.

Yields

	Tonnes-ha	Tonnes-acre
All varieties	4.54	1.84
All Champagne varieties	4.49	1.82
All non-Champagne varieties	4.57	1.85
Top 25% - all varieties	8.70	3.52
Top 50% - all varieties	6.96	2.82
Bottom 50% - all varieties	2.17	0.88
Bottom 25% - all varieties	1.05	0.42

8.70 t-ha (3.52 t-acre). For those in the last quartile, yields were in many cases negligible – several growers reported harvesting nothing from some varieties – and at 1.05 t-ha (0.42 t-acre) must have made for a miserable end to a long growing season. As has been mentioned

	Tonnes-ha	Tonnes-acre
Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex	6.89	2.79
Kent, East Sussex	5.06	2.05
South East	4.31	1.74
South West	3.95	1.60
Thames and Chilterns	2.59	1.05
Wiltshire, Devon	2.08	0.84

As can be seen from Table 1, the average yield across all producers who contributed to this survey was 4.54 t-ha (1.84 t-acre) which is below what most would consider to be economic yields. However, averages cannot tell the whole story and for those growers in the top quartile of producers, yields – given the weather and the lateness of *véraison* – were a relatively respectable above, yields varied considerably across the country, with the drier, relatively better sheltered parts faring better than those regions more exposed to the Atlantic, and especially on sites open to the prevailing winds or in regions where frost can reduce cropping levels in a few short hours.

Grape varieties

As ever, different grape varieties performed differently, much depending on site location and management skills. Growing conditions in 2016 were difficult with regard to disease control and those growers who got on top of early outbreaks of Downy Mildew were able to flower successfully and harvest reasonable yields. As can be seen from Table 3, the sugar levels in almost all varieties broke double figures, which must be a first for UK vineyards, with Chardonnay and Meunier outperforming Pinot noir by a wide margin. As ever in a difficult year, old favourites such as Reichensteiner and MA 7672 performed well, with Seyval blanc lagging behind in terms of yield, although sugars were high (for Seyval blanc). In some vineyards, even Seyval blanc succumbed to Downy Mildew, something almost never before seen in the UK, showing just how high the disease pressure was. Given the high sugar levels, acids remained high – the dry weather for the last 6 weeks before harvest saw to that – something that should favour sparkling producers over still. However, Bacchus was picked at very favourable sugar and acid levels and the best will undoubtedly be medal winners.

Table 3:		UK 2016 Grape variety performance			
Grape Variety	Sugar °OE	Potential Alc %	Acid g/l tartaric	Yield T-ha	Yield T-Acre
Bacchus	62 to 81.50	7.6 to 10.2	6.9 to 11.53	3.07	1.24
Chardonnay	62 to 90	7.8 to 11.33	9.7 to 18.0	5.58	2.26
Madeleine x Angevine 7672	73 to 78	9.2 to 9.8	9.00	6.05	2.45
Meunier	75 to 88	9.5 to 11.1	11.0 to 13.78	5.88	2.38
Pinot noir	64 to 95.5	8.0 - 12.0	9.8 to 16.6	3.00	1.21
Reichensteiner	80 to 82	10.0 to 10.3	8.5 to 9.5	8.36	3.38
Seyval blanc	60 to 72	7.5 to 9.1	11.55 to 14.78	4.58	1.85
Average all varieties	78.42	9.84	11.81	4.54	1.84

Summary

2016 was undoubtedly a challenging year for UK winegrowers. Only a few will have covered their growing costs and even fewer will have full wineries. However, the high ripeness levels, dry harvest and clean grapes are some compensation and there should be some excellent wines, both still and sparkling, for drinking in the future. 2016 has also emphasised the part played by region, vineyard site and vineyard management in creating a truly sustainable grape growing and wine making enterprise.

Note

It is a great pity that after over 60 years of modern grapegrowing in the UK, we have NO regional data to study. In the early days of the English Vineyards Association (forerunner of the UKVA) growers contributed ‘Harvest Reports’ to the then annual Grape Press and were not shy about their successes and failures. Today, with an industry ten times the size, and with much more money invested, we seem to have gone backwards in our knowledge about where and how to plant sustainable vineyards. Where are DEFRA, the UKVA, EWP, Plumpton College when you need them? The industry ought to be collecting and publishing data which covers every aspect of growing grapes and making wine in the UK so that both current and future growers have the data at hand to study and help them make informed decisions about where to plant, what to plant and how to manage vineyards.²

² For the type of report the UK should aspire to, look at the one produced for Luxembourg growers. With 1,285-ha (half the UK’s planted area) they manage to produce a very comprehensive annual report covering every aspect of the year. http://www.ivv.public.lu/publikationen/weinjahr_2015.pdf